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Save Merit: Leave It Alone

Dem Plan Threatens Scholarship, Eliminates Funding Source

MIDLAND – The best way to save the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship is to keep it as it currently exists, fully funded with dedicated revenue from the tobacco settlement, Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema said today.

“Merit is funded, period,” Sikkema said. “We have the money to keep it this way without affecting other budget programs. If people are serious about saving Merit, they should join us in our efforts to keep it fully funded with tobacco settlement dollars – the way it was created to be.”

Sikkema, R-Wyoming, was speaking to parents, school administrators and students at a Merit roundtable in Midland. He said Senate Republicans have been working hard to protect Merit and keep it unchanged ever since Governor Granholm proposed gutting the scholarship from \$2,500 to \$500 and to use the tobacco settlement fund previously earmarked for Merit to finance a \$60 million shortfall in the state Medicaid budget.

Sikkema added that a proposal by House Democrats to move Merit funding from the tobacco settlement to the general fund and to spread out scholarship payments over four years does not guarantee future funding. It also would create a disincentive for high school students to take the MEAP test, which is used to determine Merit winners and to grade educational success in local school districts.

“The Democrats’ proposal is a solution in search of a problem and I am very skeptical that they are serious about protecting Merit,” Sikkema said. “Democrats have opposed any

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efforts to keep Merit at its current funding level. Now they want to step in and save something they've been trying to eliminate.”

In March, Governor Granholm took tobacco funding from Merit to shore up the Medicaid Budget. In April, House Republicans returned tobacco funding back to the Merit Trust Fund and Senate Republicans announced they, too, would keep Merit funded at its current levels through tobacco settlement money and without the need to cut or borrow from other places in the budget.

“With tuition on the increase, the best thing we can do for working families and students is to keep the Merit Award intact and unchanged,” Sikkema said. “Any plan to change its funding source or to extend how the award is paid out threatens Merit’s future and ignores the reality that this scholarship can mean the difference whether tens of thousands of Michigan high school seniors further their academic careers in college.”

Senator Sikkema also attended Merit roundtable meetings in Saginaw and Grand Blanc.